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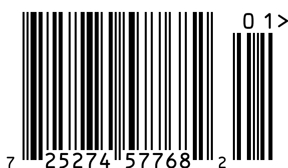

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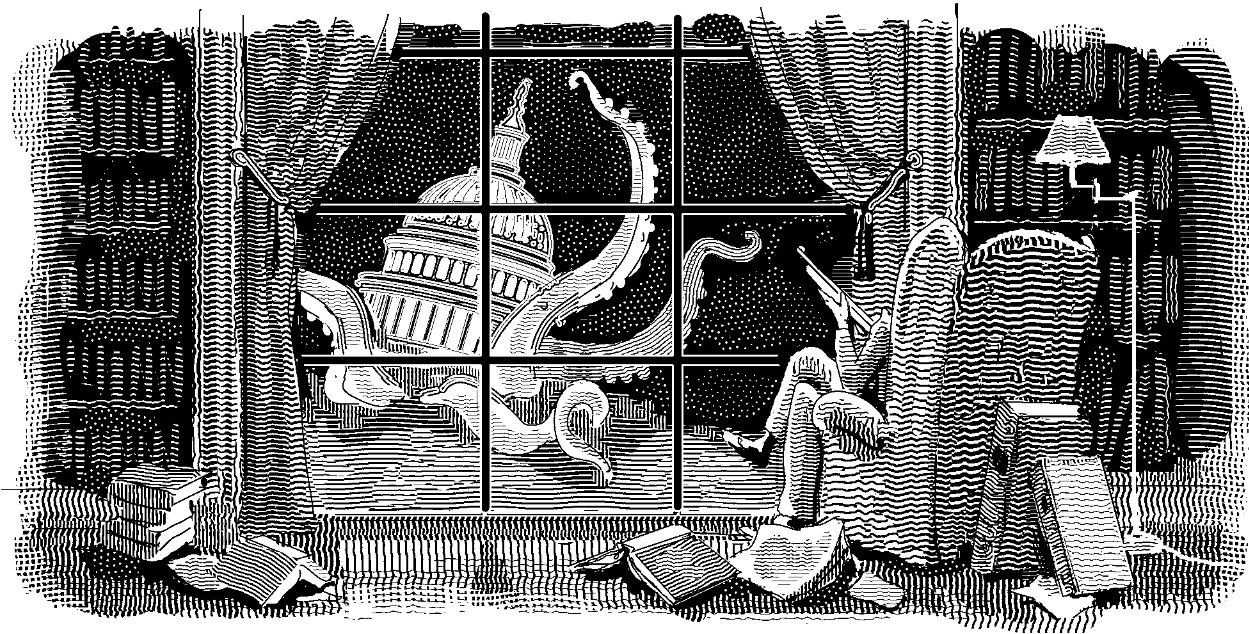
Essay by Steven F. Hayward

Reading Up on the Right



With the stunning victory of Scott Brown in Massachusetts it appears the long night of the soul for conservatives may be over. The last two years have been tough for the Right. In terms of political power, conservatism is at its lowest point in more than 30 years. A radical president and a willing Congress have expanded the size and reach of centralized government in ways that Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton never dreamed of. Although Barack Obama may be stymied on health care, cap and trade, and other large ambitions, conservatives should not suppose the tide has turned decisively in their direction. Conservatives appear confused or less than fully confident about their understanding of the economic crisis. The Tea Party movement, though reflecting a healthy populist backlash against Obama's program of governmental gigantism, lacks the programmatic focus of the tax revolt of the late 1970s, which quickly joined itself to supply-side economics. Polls reveal a public increasingly uneasy with Democratic policies, but the public also continues to hold the Republican Party in low regard.

This low pass is leading to a lot of stock-taking. Conservative intellectuals, in particular, are in eclipse at the moment. The leading public figures on the Right today tend to be the media celebrities of talk radio and cable TV, who make up in decibels what they lack in rigor and depth. We've traded Bill Buckley for Glenn Beck, Irving Kristol for Ann Coulter. The intellectual generating the most enthusiasm on the Right these days is Ayn Rand, the once-marginalized figure whose books have been selling like Shamwows since Obama took office. Neoconservatives remain in the doghouse—and not only among liberals (the Cato Institute's Ed Crane wants them thrown "under the bus"). The Religious Right is said to be a spent force.

The fraying and infighting on the Right partly revolve around whether America is still a "center-right" nation, as was confidently asserted when Ronald Reagan thumped liberals in the 1980s and Bill Clinton was compelled to move right to preserve his presidency in the 1990s. While independent voters are swinging sharply against Obama, opinion polls only show a slight uptick in the proportion of Americans who describe themselves as conservative. Reaction to Obama's overreaching should not be confused with a sea change in bedrock political sentiment. The fractiousness of the Right, rooted in conflicting intellectual principles in its different camps, is nothing new, and has always been a source of conservatism's dynamism in ways few liberals perceive. The Left, in the suggestive simile of Joe Sobran, is like a hive, uniformly swarming in support of more collectivism as if by insect instinct. The analogous simile for the Right might be a soccer or basketball team, where the players move independently of the ball in seemingly chaotic fashion.

But even if the diversity and fractiousness of the Right is a sign of health, there are still fundamental tensions that the Right has been unable to resolve. Conservatives have been observing and commenting on their intramural intellectual divisions for more than 50 years now, searching for a stable synthesis along the lines of Frank Meyer's famous "fusionism." Rather than making progress in defining a synthesis, the Right seems to be inventing still more subdivisions for itself, nowadays including "crunchy-cons" (conservatives with green lifestyles) and, if John Derbyshire has his way, what might be called "grumpy-cons," to join the ranks of neocons, paleocons, and libertarians. The good news is that conservatism is no longer the orphan of historical scholarship that Alan Brinkley described over a decade ago. To the contrary, there are perhaps more books about the Right than the Left over the past few years (partly because with only a few exceptions the Left is largely uninterested in its intellectual patrimony). But there are still some crucial blind spots in this burgeoning literature, along with some plainly wrongheaded analyses.

Conserving a Revolution

Patrick Allitt's *The Conservatives: Ideas & Personalities Throughout American History* has the great virtue of treating conservatism as an *American* phenomenon rather than as a transplant or mere derivation of European thought. It would be an excellent book to assign in any survey course on American political thought. And instead of beginning the story, as so many recent histories do, in the post-World War II decades, Allitt starts with the American Founding, though a case could be made for giving a small nod to the early colonial and Puritan settlers. Like most other observers, Allitt finds it difficult to offer a unified defini-

tion of conservatism. "[W]hy is it internally divided?" Allitt asks at the outset. Chiefly because conservatism is more "an *attitude* to social and political change" and hence "there is no consistency in conservatives' beliefs about what should be conserved."

Allitt is on the right track, though, in insisting that understanding the founding is central to any reckoning with American conservatism: "American conservatism has always had a paradoxical element, entailing the defense of a revolutionary achievement." The American Revolution has been a stumbling block for some conservatives, who deny its revolutionary character and try to portray it as continuous with British or European political thought. (Hence Russell Kirk's dislike of the Declaration of Independence, for example.) James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, both rightly considered 18th-century liberals, emerge in Allitt's account as "conservative innovators"—only in America would such a phrase not be considered an oxymoron—and *The Federalist*, according to Allitt, should be considered "the new nation's first conservative classic," even though it laid out, if not a *new*, at least an improved science of politics. Here we come across the first major difficulty. Allitt says that "conservatives have generally taken an antitheoretical approach to their world," but the politics of the founding relied heavily on theoretical insights.

Despite this, Allitt's generally unbiased and objective treatment of conservative thinkers and ideas through the decades is one of the best ever produced, even though it is still uneven in spots. He gets Lincoln largely right, while noting the Southern conservatives who vehemently hate Lincoln, but he gets Theodore Roosevelt mostly wrong. T.R.'s large and admirable personality should not distract us from his anti-conservative and often demagogic Progressivism that manifested itself in a cavalier attitude toward the Constitution, which helped prepare the transformation of the presidency and the birth of the modern administrative state.

Like most recent surveys of the Right, Allitt's narrative really gets hopping in the postwar years, with the emergence of free-market intellectuals such as Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig Von Mises, and Milton Friedman, and the sensational arrival of William F. Buckley, Jr., and *National Review*. At this point, Allitt recognizes, the Right graduated from being an attitude to being a self-conscious movement. Allitt also makes a nod to a few important conservative activists and activist organizations such as Phyllis Schlafly and the Young Americans for Freedom, and notes the centrality of the *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision to the shape of modern American politics.

As good as Allitt's account is, Gregory L. Schneider offers a more thorough one in his new survey, *The Conservative Century: From Reaction to Revolution*, precisely because it is limited to the 20th century. Like Allitt, Schneider confronts at the outset the problem of defining conservatism: "The focus on factionalism demonstrates that American conservatism possesses a protean character and that self-definition has been an elusive, and fascinating, conservative quest for a century." Noting successive attempts to cobble together a definition, he throws up his hands: "It might be time to move beyond such efforts."

Books discussed in this essay:

The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History, by Patrick Allitt. Yale University Press, 336 pages, $35

The Conservative Century: From Reaction to Revolution, by Gregory L. Schneider. Rowman & Littlefield, 280 pages, $39.95 (cloth), $19.95 (paper)

Reappraising the Right: The Past and Future of American Conservatism, by George H. Nash. ISI Books, 450 pages, $27.95

The Death of Conservatism, by Sam Tanenhaus. Random House, 144 pages, $17

We Are Doomed: Reclaiming Conservative Pessimism, by John Derbyshire. Crown Forum, 272 pages, $26

While Schneider's copious account of the post-war conservative movement is superb, his brief summary of conservatism in the decades before World War II, like Allitt's, leaves some important questions unexamined. They both offer good surveys of the few American conservative thinkers of the Progressive and New Deal eras such as Albert Jay Nock, Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, Ralph Adams Cram, and the Southern Agrarians, but do not explore why there was not a more robust conservative critique of the constitutional deformations of Progressive ideology. Schneider notes that except for a few spasms in the 1930s, "The Old Right lacked the institutions necessary to confront the New Deal political revolution." But of course the problem goes back further than FDR. Schneider writes elsewhere, "The Old Rightists never were effective in addressing the central tendencies of liberalism and remained, as historian George H. Nash described them, 'scattered voices of protest, profoundly pessimistic about the future of the country.'" Not until after World War II, admits Schneider, did conservatives understand that they needed to "plunge into politics," define their principles, spread their ideas, and seek electoral majorities via a necessarily more populist appeal: "The answer was not the conservatism of Cram, Irving Babbitt, or the Southern Agrarians."

Conservatives and Progressives

Which brings us to George H. Nash, the author of one of the first major treatments of conservatism, his 1976 classic *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*. (It is tempting to paraphrase Albert North Whitehead's comment about Plato and philosophy, and suggest that most histories of modern conservatism are footnotes to Nash.) Nash updates his previous work with a new essay collection, *Reappraising the Right: The Past and Future of American Conservatism*. He is also the biographer of an important pre-war figure—Herbert Hoover—and Hoover casts into particularly sharp focus the anemia of pre-war conservatism.

In his new collection Nash notes Hoover's "idiosyncratic blend of progressivism and anti-statism," which pleased no one. Hoover "showed the influence of pre-1914 Progressivism" that made him both a "modernizer" and a "technocrat." Hoover's dilemma points directly to the twin problems of pre-war conservatism: the inability to reckon fully with the real social and economic problems of industrialization, along with the slowness to perceive and react to the Progressives' wholesale overturning of the Constitution—amounting to refounding the country—that occurred during these decades. Hoover appears to have staked out a position midway between Hamilton's and Jefferson's famous disagreement about whether large-scale national commerce or individual, small-scale agrarianism was the best form of political economy for the preservation of the republic. As Nash writes,

> we must not lose sight of the fact that for all of Hoover's reforming and modernizing impulses, he also had a conserving purpose: the preservation, in an urban, industrial society, of the American tradition of equal opportunity.... The purpose of Hoover's limited governmental regulation was to strengthen and preserve

American Individualism, not to subvert or supplant it.

Here we see Hoover embracing the decent or rightful purposes of Progressivism—we might say Hoover was the original "compassionate conservative"—while lacking Calvin Coolidge's insight into the deforming premises of Progressive political thought. (Nash's collection, by the way, includes a terrific essay on the complicated relationship between Coolidge and Hoover when the latter was Coolidge's secretary of commerce, though Nash doesn't contrast their constitutional views—chiefly because Hoover didn't seem to have any.) Conservative thinkers—mostly in the libertarian camp—have only begun in recent decades to confront the genuine problems (child labor, workplace safety, labor markets, concentrated market power, and so forth) the Progressives sought to tame.

One reason for this lacuna in conservatism is that the so-called Social Darwinists of the late 19th century, usually counted as conservatives, lustily attacked the natural right ideas of the founders and essentially paved the way for the formal rejection of the founding by Woodrow Wilson and other Progressives. This problem is still not widely recognized today in the chronicles of conservative thought. Conservatism has also been ambivalent about the Hamilton-Jefferson argument. Allitt recognizes both Hamilton and Jefferson as conservatives, though acknowledging that the case for each is not ironclad. But here we note that one strain of Progressivism—the Herbert Croly variety—was thought to be a synthesis of the Hamilton-Jefferson argument: endorsing Hamiltonian means to Jeffersonian ends.

Even if Croly's prose were clear, the idea would still be muddled. Yet it raises one of the central questions in any attempt to define conservatism: is conservatism merely a branch of the liberal tradition, or is it a fundamental alternative to liberalism? Allitt fumbles this question at the end of his treatment. Having argued that conservatism is more an "attitude" than a coherent doctrine, he briefly dismisses Louis Hartz's thesis in *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) that Lockean liberalism is the sole political philosophy defining the American experience. "Individuals whose ideas I have here described as conservatives [Hartz] treated merely as the inhabitants of one end of the liberal spectrum," Allitt writes. Hartz's book "was an artifact of its time," Allit concludes. "Fifty years later... it would be perverse to voice an argument like Hartz's." Well, one post-Hartz figure who embraced his view was Ronald Reagan, who Nash points out liked to argue, "Today's conservative is, of course, the true liberal—in the classical meaning of the word."

Leftward Ho?

Yet Nash also notes that by becoming a self-conscious political movement with its own national establishment, conservatism would seem to have absorbed Croly's framework of using national, Hamiltonian means for individualist, Jeffersonian ends. In other words, contemporary conservatism in practice is not far removed from Hooverism, despite Reagan's robust voice and actions. "[I]n practice if not quite in theory," Nash laments, "American conservatism today stands well to the left of where it stood in 1980."

The leftward drift of American conservatism will come as a surprise to Sam Tanenhaus, who argues in *The Death of Conservatism* that what ails the Right today is precisely its drift to reactionary "revanchism." He charges that the conservative movement has not accommodated itself *enough* to the leftward end of the liberal continuum of which it is a part. Instead, the "revanchist" Right today is "committed to a counter-revolution, whether the restoration of America's pre-New Deal *ancien régime*, the return to Cold War-style Manichaeanism, or the revival of pre-modern 'family values.'" Today's conservatives, Tanenhaus says, "seem the heirs of the French rather than of the American Revolution," and are the true Jacobins of American politics, rigidly attached to "orthodoxy." (Tanenhaus finished his book before the tea parties broke out; there's no telling how many more odious comparisons these would have summoned forth.)

Tanenhaus earned for himself a large portion of respect from conservatives for his masterly biography of Whittaker Chambers nearly 15 years ago, and although he writes with grace and attempts to treat conservative ideas seriously, with *The Death of Conservatism* he has squandered his goodwill with the Right. Despite his professed sympathy for conservatism, his depiction of it in this book will be unrecognizable or seem badly distorted to most right-wingers. *The Death of Conservatism* offers yet more evidence that the *New York Times* (Tanenhaus edits the Sunday *Times Book Review* and "Week in Review" sections) exists in some kind of twisted parallel universe.

A properly oriented or "realist" conservatism, Tanenhaus thinks, exists to make liberalism better. A plausible argument, perhaps, but Tanenhaus's model of realist conservatism is mostly the *National Review* of the 1950s and '60s—especially the outlook of Whittaker Chambers, James Burnham, Willmoore Kendall, and Kendall's protégé, Garry Wills—along with certain practical men of the Right, particularly Eisenhower and Nixon. There is a delicious and almost comical irony in Tanenhaus's em-

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brace of the old *National Review*. On the surface his argument would seem to be a repudiation of Dwight Macdonald's dismissal of *National Review* at the time of its founding: "We have long needed a good conservative magazine.... This is not it.... It is neither good nor conservative." Macdonald's complaint against *National Review* was, on closer inspection, nearly identical to Tanenhaus's complaint against conservatism today, namely, that *National Review* was merely "anti-liberal" rather than conservative, that is, not properly deferential to liberalism. Buckley's response reveled in exactly what Macdonald (and Tanenhaus) scorned: "[*National Review*] does not consult Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. to determine the limits of tolerable conservative behavior." Yet that is more or less exactly what Tanenhaus thinks conservatism needs to do today. Tanenhaus's argument turns out to be a restatement of G.K. Chesterton's quip that the business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes, while the business of conservatives is to prevent the mistakes from being corrected. No thanks.

History and Its Discontents

But there is a more serious core to Tanenhaus's embrace of Chambers, Burnham, and "realistic" conservatism that explains the defects of his analysis and reveals a serious problem for conservatism. Consider the astounding conclusion of this passage:

> Once again the American right must 'face historical reality,' as Whittaker Chambers advised half a century ago.... It is also why David Souter, who in his nineteen years on the Supreme Court infuriated so many on the right by his refusal to advance the movement's pet judicial causes—instead immersing himself in the study of history, partly to uncover in the past 'some relevance to a constitutional rule where earlier judges saw none'—may well endure as the most authentic conservative in the Court's modern history.

Resist the urge to snort coffee out your nose at the endorsement of Souter as the age's "most authentic conservative," or write off Tanenhaus for a lame attempt at deadpan humor. We see here in his evocation of "history" that modern liberals—or Progressives as they more accurately refer to themselves lately—presume, without any longer having to adduce a reason, that history is moving purposely in a direction in conformity with their ever-expansive social vision. Within this bubble of presumption it is natural to suppose that only a hidebound reactionary wedded to an unthinking orthodoxy could believe otherwise. In other words, if thinking conservatives would only look more seriously at the flow of history, as Souter did, they'd realize they are on the wrong side of it and get with the program.

While the stiff and formal Hegelian theories of History or Progress have faded into the mists, the sentimental residue lingers on. The progressive-historical attitude has become so embedded in the liberal mind that its pedigree is no longer recalled; thus liberalism presumes the illegitimacy of conservatism without having to argue the matter. This defect of the liberal mind finds its parallel in the conservative mind, however, which Tanenhaus unknowingly reveals in his approving citation of Whittaker Chambers's counsel that conservatives need, however distasteful it may be, to accommodate history. Tanenhaus writes: "To Chambers, an avid student of history, well schooled in Marxist argument, it was obvious that the growing dependency on government was a function of the unstoppable rise of industrial capitalism and the new technology it had brought forth.... And the Right had better adjust."

> A return to the American Founders, rather than to Edmund Burke, ought to provide us with a means of seriously and explicitly contesting liberalism over the meaning of progress.

Chambers was of course a pessimist, noted for thinking he was joining the losing side of history. (One wonders what Chambers would have made of Ronald Reagan, let alone the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union.) His pessimism was rooted partly in what he saw as the asymmetry of each side's moral strength: the Communists and the radical Left were determined and ruthless; the West was decadent and weak. But his pessimism was really informed by the fact that although he traded his Communism for Christianity, he never really shed his Marxist historicism. Ditto for James Burnham, also cited in Tanenhaus's narrative. This lingering fatalism represents a self-inflicted debilitation for conservatism.

Neither Chambers nor the conservative movement as shaped by Buckley ever explicitly challenged the Left's idea of progress, or the terms in which the Left understood human advancement. This may have had something to do with why Buckley ultimately abandoned his "big think" book about a conservative vision of the world; it will be interesting to see what Tanenhaus has to say about that in his eventual WFB biography. But remember the *National Review* rallying cry: to stand athwart history yelling "Stop," rather than grabbing hold of history and sending it in a different direction.

Chesterton reminded us, "All conservatism is based upon the idea that if you leave things alone you leave them as they are. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone you leave it to a torrent of change." But Chesterton also noted, "We are fond of talking about 'progress'; that is a dodge to avoid discussing what is good." Tanenhaus is right that pre-war conservatives did a poor job of understanding and responding to the changes that were taking place as a result of industrialization and urbanization; but is a return to Burkean conservatism the answer, as Tanenhaus suggests? The trouble with a generic "Burkean" approach to understanding change and progress is that it is a weak reed against the Left, as can be seen by Woodrow Wilson's easy fusion of Burke and Hegel in the service of reinterpreting the Constitution. (If any more evidence were needed, consider David Brooks's report that Barack Obama is an admirer of Burke; one looks forward to a future Obama memoir in which he will provide a Burkean veneer to Saul Alinsky's little platoons of union goons.)

Tanenhaus, who professes to admire Willmoore Kendall, would have done well to think through Kendall's critique of Russell Kirk's Burkeanism. In Kendall's unfinished *Sages of Conservatism*, he writes: "Let us ask, rather: Is the [Burkean] teaching *sound*, that is, a teaching that contemporary American conservatism would be well-advised to let the Benevolent Sage of Mecosta talk it into accepting? And let us give at once the only possible answer, which is No." Kendall scorned "Kirk's writing and thinking with an eye too much to Burke and not enough to the Framers, so that he addresses himself to, for Americans, the wrong topics in an inappropriate vocabulary." A return to the founders, rather than Burke, ought to provide us with a means of seriously and explicitly contesting liberalism over the meaning of progress.

The Audacity of Hopelessness

On the other hand, we could just resign ourselves to the thought that liberalism is inevitable, unstoppable. Such is the advice of John Derbyshire's *We Are*

Doomed: Recovering Conservative Pessimism. Derb, as his friends and fans on *National Review Online* know him, might seem to be the Dr. House of the conservative movement—acerbic, abrasive, sarcastic, but usually right; but a better comparison is to Albert Jay Nock. Seldom has doom and gloom been expressed with so much style and laugh-out-loud prose. In fact, Derb appears in places to offer a more plain-spoken version of Nock's famous essay on the "remnant": "We pessimists, you see, are not only wiser than the smiley-face crowd; we are *better people*" (original emphasis). For all of his acerbic grumpiness, one can imagine Derb going down on the Titanic with a relentless stream of mordant wit about the whole thing. *We Are Doomed* is simply a great read, and will have an oddly cheering effect on some readers.

Conservatives of all types will find much to agree with, and much to be troubled by, in Derb's tour of the horizon. Most will be in emphatic agreement with his critique of the diversity mongers and money-grubbing educrats. "Education," he writes, "is a vast sea of lies, waste, corruption, crackpot theorizing, and careerist logrolling," for which there is little or no chance of serious reform. More problematic is his chapter on culture and human nature, where he dilates on recent findings on genetic and biological determinism that undermine a central tenet of conservatism, that culture shapes human character. He may well be right or partly right about this, and he is certainly right that "culturism" (as he calls it) is the premise for leftist social engineering. He recognizes that the implications of his speculations in this area would require "a new conservatism."

Derb also thinks the U.S. is fated to follow the example of Europe by becoming even more secular: "America's religious exceptionalism is doomed, and American conservatism with it." He is against "the damn fool Iraq war" (though he initially supported it as a punitive raid, akin to gunboat diplomacy), along with the "conservative utopianism" that thinks we can implant democracy in the Arab world. It is the foreign policy cousin, he argues, of "compassionate conservatism" at home. He refreshingly omits the usual animadversions against the dreaded neocons, but wishes the George W. Bush who spoke against "nation-building" in the 2000 campaign had stuck to this position.

In advocating that conservatives embrace "the audacity of hopelessness," Derbyshire does not offer political prescriptions or strategies for the conservative movement. To the contrary, he says near the end, "I fully expect to pass the rest of my life as an American without ever seeing any major conservative legislation passed by Congress, or any major executive action drawn from conservative principles, or any Supreme Court ruling that will do more than slow the advance of state power by a percentage point or two." In his last chapter he attempts to conform to convention by offering some hope, though this might be subtle parody on his part (note the juxtaposition of Samuel Beckett's stage play *Happy Days* with the television sitcom *Happy Days*). His "hope" is pretty forlorn and antipolitical: through pessimism "we can still transmit something of value to the future, while seeking for private contentment in the present while the earth-pile rises."

Here one arrives at the odd, unintended convergence between Tanenhaus and Derbyshire. Tanenhaus thinks the conservative movement would be better off if it ceased to think of itself as the self-conscious political movement it has been since the 1950s. Implicitly Derbyshire's privatization of conservatism would have us do the same thing. While the prospects for conservative "revanchism" may still seem daunting in the Age of Obama, it is nonetheless surprising that Derbyshire never raises the obvious question: without the conservative movement of the past 50 years, how much worse would things be? The revival of conservatism, drawing upon the richness of American exceptionalism, probably explains most of the political variance between the United States and Europe in the postwar era—explains, in particular, why America has refused to make peace with the modern welfare state, why we remain a military superpower, and why Americans remain a religious people. With Obama faltering and a resurgence of conservative energy evident, even Derb might want to don his armor, draw his sword, and enter the fray once more.

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